

A World AIDS Day Message

December 1, 2006

Dedicated to:

Miami-Dade County Health Department Office of HIV/AIDS/TB

Evelyn Ullah, BSN, MSW, Director

Thirty-three years ago, the staff of the Dade County Health Department welcomed me into their offices and hearts. In 1973, I arrived in Miami as a young, infectious diseases internist and preventive medicine epidemiologist on EIS assignment from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta. For two years I worked side-by-side with you. We were professional colleagues. We supported one another's endeavors. In many instances we became lifelong friends. Indeed, I credit my Miami-Dade experiences among the most essential to my entire professional career. My love and respect for the value of those of you in the "front lines" remains undiminished.

Today, I am mindful that a quarter of a century has passed since physicians in your city and elsewhere helped make my colleagues and me at the CDC aware of a new disease: AIDS. That outbreak of a mysterious, consistently fatal disease evolved into a "global pandemic" with catastrophic consequences for the entire world. I am among the fortunate few who – on behalf of all – were recognized widely in the historical chronology of the early epidemic. But each of us has found a way to make a personal professional contribution to restrain its spread, person-by-person... and culture-by-culture.

Early in this "Disease of the Century" you in Dade County were making major contributions. Exactly 25 years ago this month, the first hemophilia-AIDS case in history was diagnosed and reported to CDC through the State of Florida/Miami-Dade Health Department by the renowned Joel Ehrenkranz, MD, former head of the U. of Miami School of Medicine's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health. Many other AIDS cases came to national attention because of conscientious diagnoses in Miami by physicians who cared for domestic U.S. or international patients. Enormous HIV prevention and treatment efforts were conducted.

Recently, I had an opportunity to review how much your Miami-Dade Health Department's community outreach and educational efforts have contributed to my own work with the National Institutes of Health's HIV vaccine clinical projects. Your contributions to that rigorous clinical research -- as well as to clinical care, prevention and education -- give hope in a time of great darkness. Millions around the world, unable to know or admire you as I can, owe you a debt of gratitude.

Dale N. Lawrence, MD, MPH, FACP